
HANDS UP, DON'T SHOOT: A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON UNARMED POLICE SHOOTINGS OF BLACK PEOPLE IN AMERICA

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The killings of unarmed Black men and women in America at the hands of police officers are a prolific, pervasive, and unjust epidemic. We suggest that community psychologists, advocates, and policymakers use perspectives and values embedded within Community Psychology in order to help combat this issue. This includes: 1) taking an ecological approach to understanding the context that contributes to and maintains systems of racial inequality, and 2) using Community Psychology values such as sense of community and respect for diversity to address the problem. However, inherent paradoxical issues, such as, the community-diversity dialectic (Neal & Neal, 2014), arise when integrating core Community Psychology values. This potential roadblock on the journey to using Community Psychology to advance this social justice issue must be overcome. We describe what this dialectic entails and provide an example of an organization of advocates, The Black Lives Matter movement, that effectively uses Community Psychology values, methods, and perspectives to overcome the community-diversity dialectic and leads efforts aimed towards addressing this social issue.

Keywords: community psychology, Black Lives Matter, diversity, values, intersectional political consciousness, social justice

1. Introduction

In the past few years, the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has increased public consciousness related to the unarmed killings of Black people in the United States. Efforts – including the BLM movement – have attempted to address this problem through interventions at the local, state, and national levels. The Community Psychology values, *respect for diversity* and *sense of community* embody what is needed to successfully work together to improve these inequitable conditions. The current paper examines how an ecological perspective can be used to understand why and how racial inequality is maintained in these systems and explores how the community-diversity dialectic can be bridged, within the BLM movement, to move towards a more equitable and racially just society (Neal & Neal, 2014; Brodsky & Faryal, 2006).

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2. The Data

Black Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police officers than Whites (Lowery, 2016). Although police have shot and killed more Whites than Blacks, there is a disparity because there are significantly less Black people in the U.S. than White people. Indeed, White people account for almost 62% of the U.S. population and 49% of those killed by law enforcement. However, Black people account for 13% of the U.S. population, and 24% of those fatally shot and killed by law enforcement. Furthermore, Blacks are more likely to be unarmed when shot and killed by police officers (Nix, Campbell, Byers, & Alpert, 2017). This finding holds true even when controlling for age, mental illness, region, jurisdiction crime rate, and city size.

Although there is also a disparity for Black women, much of the research in the area of police shootings of civilians has focused on Black men. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), out of 2285 legal intervention deaths (1.5 per million population per year) from 2010 to 2014, Black males are 2.5 to 2.8 times more likely to be killed by police officers than White males and 1.7 times more likely than Latino males (Buehler, 2017; Krieger, Kiang, Chen, & Waterman, 2015). Police officers are also over twice as likely to non-fatally shoot Blacks compared to their White counterparts (VICE News, 2017). This is aligned with prior studies that have found that people are more likely to shoot a Black target than a White target. In a meta-analysis exploring shooter bias against Blacks (Mekawi & Bresin, 2015), three groups of people (police officers, undergraduate students, community members) all had the same shooter bias. Participants, regardless of group, had a bias toward shooting Black targets relative to White targets. Additionally, participants were quicker to shoot armed Black targets compared to White armed targets, and slower to not shoot unarmed Black targets relative to unarmed White targets. Thus, there are extreme racial disparities in officer-involved shootings and killings, whether Blacks are unarmed or armed.

3. Ecological Perspective on the Problem

To effectively address the problem, it is essential to explore issues of racism from structural and ecological perspectives, because the lens through which a problem is examined determines subsequent definitions and interventions (Kloos et al., 2012; Ryan, 1976). For example, contemporary arguments that the killings of unarmed Black people are due to “bad cops” or “criminal behavior” often ignore, discount, or minimize the importance of context in the lives of both the victims and perpetrators of this violence (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). Instead, when considering the issue of disproportionate rates of unarmed police shootings and killings of Black people, it is vital to examine the role and impact of social context in the maintenance of systemic racism.

3.1. *Racism*

Black Americans have a unique position in society that is grounded in continuous oppression and discrimination (James, 1993; Jones, 1997). These conditions began with enslavement, and remnants from it persist through alternate, modern-day forms of oppression that have

disproportionate and adverse effects on Blacks (Alexander, 2010; Blackmon, 2008). As a result, multiple mediums, such as news outlets and other media, perpetuate overt and subtle messages that Blacks are inferior and dangerous. For example, a study by Dixon (2017) found that news and other media outlets “routinely and inaccurately portray Black families as sources of social *instability* in society and portray White families as sources of social *stability* in society, irrespective of facts to the contrary” (p. 3). The negative portrayals from the media have been found to influence Americans to believe that the narrative presented is factual. A study by Verhaeghen, Aikman, and Van Gulick (2011) examined the words that are typically paired when Black people are mentioned compared to White people in a database of magazines, articles, and literature that the average American would read. Words that were written in association with Blacks (in order of most to least used) included: poor, violent, religious, lazy, cheerful, and dangerous. Conversely, the words most associated with Whites were: wealthy, progressive, conventional, stubborn, successful, and educated. Further, there are negative and dehumanizing narratives in the media that are specific and unique to Black men (e.g., as criminals, unemployed, violent, etc.; The Opportunity Agenda, 2011), Black boys (e.g., as older and less innocent than White children; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso 2014), and Black women (e.g., as dominant, angry, gold digger, etc.; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Walton, 2013). These data suggest that normative perceptions of Black people are more negative compared to White people.

The racially biased attitudes in media and literature are a reflection of individual and institutional implicit bias—the attitudes and stereotypes that unconsciously affect one’s perspective, actions, and decisions (The Kirwan Institute, 2015). Moreover, as resources in the macrosystem, these works may also insidiously impact others’ implicit racial biases. In a study that assessed implicit racial bias, participants who claimed to not have racially prejudiced attitudes were found to have implicit racial biases (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002). This finding indicates that implicit racial biases are often unconscious and deeply rooted. As such, implicit (or explicit) racial biases that exist in groups or individuals who have the social power to change public or institutional policy may result in racially biased systems, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, and the racial bias in the criminal and juvenile legal systems.

3.2. *School-to-Prison Pipeline*

In recent years, public attention has been paid to the disproportionate number of Black youth being moved from public schools into the juvenile legal system, which is known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2013). In the 1980s and 1990s, a national emphasis on “zero-tolerance” policies resulted in infrastructure changes within schools, such as increased use of security measures (school police, metal detectors, drug-sniffing dogs, etc.), and increased use of punishment including suspending or expelling youth (ACLU, 2013; Dancy, 2014; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Acts that were once viewed as minor infractions were considered to be criminal offenses after the implementation of zero-tolerance policies; for instance, a student who shot a paper clip with a rubber band at a classmate was taken to the county jail in Chicago, Illinois (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Over time, research on these policy changes has led to a heightened concern about the disproportionate discipline of Black students (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). For example, Black children are three times more likely than Latinx and Asian youth to be suspended from

elementary and secondary schools (Dancy, 2014). Implicit racial bias has been suggested as the explanation for this differential treatment. For example, researchers found that while White male students' bad behavior was seen as being "naughty," but Black male students' bad behavior was perceived as malevolent or destructive (Ferguson, 2000; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014).

In 2008, the American Psychological Association (APA) concluded that "zero tolerance policies may negatively affect the relationship of education with juvenile justice and appear to conflict, to some degree, with current best knowledge concerning adolescent development" (p. 852). Harsher consequences for drug and/or weapons offences in schools have led to an increase in referrals of youth to juvenile legal systems (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Wald & Losen, 2003), and students who are suspended are more likely to drop out of school and be involved in the juvenile legal system compared to those who have not been suspended (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest that these punishments early on in life may have long-lasting consequences. This is problematic because these early life punishments in the school system disproportionately affect Black students.

3.3. *Criminal Legal System*

The explicit and implicit bias towards Blacks has led to and reinforced negative stereotypes, which have ultimately led to criminal legal system policies that disadvantage them. In 1971, President Nixon declared the "War on Drugs," which was a set of national policies that were intended to discourage and decrease the production, distribution, and consumption of drugs. This declaration initiated several policies, including stiffer sentencing via mandatory minimums and stricter release laws, which led to more law violators being sent to prison with longer lengths of stay, compared to before the "War on Drugs." Furthermore, although the majority of drug users were White, disproportionate enforcement of these policies in low-income, Black neighborhoods led to disparities in who was criminalized for drug offenses, leading to the mass incarceration of Black people (Alexander, 2010; Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Nunn, 2002; Roberts, 2004). Over the next three decades, these drug enforcement laws led to Blacks steadily populating U.S. prisons (Roberts, 2004). Currently, the racial disparities in rates of arrest and incarceration among Blacks continue to surpass Whites and other racial minority groups (Sykes & Maroto, 2016).

The mass incarceration of Blacks exacerbated negative views and stereotypes of this population, and furthered implicit bias within and outside of the criminal legal system (Alexander, 2010). Generally, Blacks are viewed more negatively than Whites (Verhaeghen et al., 2011). This implicit bias extends to the criminal legal system. For example, implicit bias can adversely impact judge sentencing; judges are more likely to sentence killers of White victims to death than killers of Black victims, and Black defendants are more likely to be sentenced with the death penalty than White defendants (Banks, Eberhardt & Ross, 2006).

Police officers, who enforce laws within communities and have sworn to protect and serve, live and work in personal, cultural, and professional environments that consistently views Blacks in a negative manner. As a result, implicit bias—the incorrect, unconscious assumptions about Black people as "dangerous and criminal" (Dottolo & Stewart, 2008, p. 354)—influences where police officers patrol and whom they are more likely to stop, search, and arrest. In 2016, for example, an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice (2016) concluded that the Baltimore

Police Department used “enforcement strategies that produce severe and unjustified disparities in the rates of stops, searches and arrests of African Americans” (p. 3). These manifestations of individual-level implicit biases are perpetuated through racially biased institutional-level policies such as redlining, decreased funding of school systems in predominately low SES and Black communities, and discriminatory hiring practices.

4. Black Lives Matter and the Community-Diversity Dialectic

Community Psychology has guiding core values that include individual and family wellness, sense of community, respect for human diversity, social justice, empowerment and citizen participation, collaboration and community strengths, and empirical grounding (Kloos et al., 2012). According to Kloos and colleagues (2012), sense of community, an essential part of Community Psychology research and practice, refers to “a perception of belongingness, interdependence, and mutual commitment that links individuals within a collective unity” (p. 27; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Sense of community is conceptualized to incorporate four elements: membership, shared emotional connection, fulfillment of needs, and mutual influence (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Furthermore, respect for human diversity entails recognizing and honoring of the variety of individuals’ communities and social identities based on dimensions such as, but not limited to, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and sexual orientation.

These values are needed to guide collaborative decisions and take action on issues of racism and police brutality. Yet, scholars have suggested that developing a sense of community and having respect for diversity are incompatible concepts—referred to as the “community-diversity dialectic” (Neal & Neal, 2014). This dialectic proposed that contexts aimed at developing a sense of community are often in opposition to contexts in which respect for diversity is fostered (Townley, Kloos, Green, & Franco, 2011). As Wiesenfeld (1996) points out, if “community” refers to a homogenous group of people, it may indicate that there is little room for variation within the group. It is for this reason that diversity has been described as the “Achilles heel” of social movements (Buehler, 1990; Greenwood, 2008) because it requires boundary work in that defining what the movement *is* also requires establishing what it *is not*. Once the boundaries are defined, it would appear that those who do not share the same set of values, beliefs, attitudes, or identities either remain at the margins or develop their own “in-group” with separate boundaries.

4.1. #BlackLivesMatter

#BlackLivesMatter is a movement that was founded by three Black women after Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black minor, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman was a community member who thought Trayvon looked “suspicious,” and was subsequently acquitted of Martin’s death. The movement vehemently opposes systemic racism and police violence against Black people. While the movement began by protesting the deaths of unarmed Black people, it has gradually transformed into a politically involved movement with dozens of local chapters. Formal members of the movement have taken part in various actions that aim to end racial oppression, such as advocating for policy change with local and state legislators. With a

clear platform, the BLM movement generated energy among those who were aligned with their beliefs.

4.2. *Bridging the Gap: Finding Commonality across Social Identities*

Within the current BLM movement, achieving racial justice for the Black community is the superordinate goal that is shared by all members. However, the movement founders have made efforts to put the most marginalized identities at the forefront of the movement. It is within their founding principles to highlight the importance of all Black lives and shed light on those who identify as Black and: queer, trans, disabled, undocumented, individuals with criminal records, women, and others along the gender spectrum. In this way, BLM's platform reflects an intersectional political consciousness: "a set of political beliefs and action orientations rooted in recognition of the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed, when deciding what corrective goals to pursue, and when selecting the appropriate means for pursuing these goals" (Greenwood, 2008, p.38). In contrast, a *singular consciousness* emphasizes a single axis of identities, such as gender, race, or class, as it relates to experiences of oppression. By rejecting a singular consciousness and instead emphasizing and promoting intersectionality and diversity within all Black lives, BLM transcends the community-diversity dialectic.

Greenwood (2008) explored the impact of these belief systems and diversity on group solidarity. Consistent with the community-diversity dialectic, the findings confirmed that greater diversity leads to more challenges in an individual perceiving her or his group as a single cohesive community. Importantly, though, this was dependent on political consciousness; although the highest levels of solidarity were among women in homogenous groups with a highly singular political consciousness, an intersectional political consciousness appeared to attenuate the negative association of diversity and commitment to the organization. Holding an intersectional political consciousness strengthened group commitment in diverse groups, whereas singular political consciousness undermined it. Greenwood (2008) suggested that diversity and sense of community are *not* incompatible if one's membership involves an investment in and the promotion of intersectional political consciousness, writing "when a diverse group of people comes together to work for social change, the greatest solidarity with that group will be observed among those whose political consciousness is relatively more intersectional. In contrast, when a group is relatively homogeneous, the greatest solidarity should be observed among individuals whose political consciousness is relatively more singular and less intersectional" (p. 45). In this way, BLM has found a way to bridge the gap and combine the Community Psychology concepts/values of diversity and sense of community. The following examples provide an understanding of how an intersectional political consciousness manifests within BLM.

4.3. *#BLM and Gender*

Congruent with the intersectional political consciousness that values both community and diversity, BLM is very intentional in emphasizing that *all* Black lives matter. Although the movement began in response to the unjust unarmed killing of Black men, BLM organizers have made a point to include variations of Black people who do not include just Black men. For

instance, there are many injustices and violent acts that involve Black women and Black transgender people, especially transgender Black women. Similar to Black men, Black women and Black transgender women are also vulnerable groups. Black women account for 13% of the U.S. population, but are 33% of all U.S. women killed by police (Craven, 2017). Transgender women of color face additional violence and discrimination, from police *and* civilians. Transgender women of color accounted for 67% of homicide victims in 2013 (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2013). Additionally, in 2010, 75% of Americans who were killed due to their transgender identity were Black (Raykin, 2016) and by August of 2015, 17 of the murdered transgender Americans were transgender women of color (Abeni, 2015). The BLM movement also focuses on queer and trans lives, because as a panelist at a BLM event titled ‘Exploring Black Queer/Trans Lives’ stated, “[this is a] powerful example of intersectional framework in action...our advocacy within an intersectional framework ensures that people who are most at the margins are lifted up” (Abeni, 2015). BLM also intentionally advocates for Black women. BLM advocates for transgender Black people and Black women through demonstrations of fostering a sense of community and diversity; however, not solely focusing on the “dominant” group in BLM, which is typically Black men.

4.4. *#BLM and Economic Justice*

Continuing the legacy of Black activists in promoting economic justice demands, BLM recognizes that police violence in Black communities is related to race *and* class. For example, in 2014, Eric Garner was stopped by the New York Police Department because they suspected that he was selling cigarettes from packs without tax stamps. The officers put him in a chokehold that resulted in his death. For many like Garner, working in the underground economy is one of few options to make a living. In fact, discriminatory housing and zoning policies, poor quality education, barriers to accessing higher education, and legal obstacles have made accessing legal work more difficult or impossible for many marginalized groups. For this reason, BLM activists have supported workers’ rights actions, such as the 2014 protest of fast food workers in New York City. To move towards change on this issue, BLM released a nine-point economic plan seeking economic justice for all (The Movement for Black Lives, 2018).

4.5. *#BLM and Immigrant Rights*

In addition to an economic justice platform, BLM has a strong stance on immigrants’ rights, which is in alignment with their values and commitment to advocating for marginalized people of color. In their stance, BLM has called for the end of deportations, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, and the need for mandated legal representation in immigration court (The Movement for Black Lives, 2018). Indeed, race has historically played a role in United States immigration law, as far back as the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act (Quota Act) which established racial and ethnic hierarchies, which privileged individuals from certain nations over others (Ngai, 1999). Moreover, immigration detention and the criminal legal system are connected and inform each other in policy and practice, with the increase of immigrant detention coinciding with the growth of the prison system. According to the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (2016)—a national organization that the founder of BLM is heavily involved in—Black immigrants make

up 7.2% of the non-citizen population in the U.S., but comprise 20.3% of immigrants facing deportation due to criminal grounds.

4.6. *Implications*

There are meaningful implications for promoting an intersectional political consciousness as the nation moves forward in the current divisive environment. The promotion of this approach not only helps society collectively strive towards social justice efforts for marginalized groups, but it also unites diverse Black people and others who have marginalized identities. This unification is necessary for moving toward the broader goals of dismantling racist ideologies and White supremacy, as well as other interconnected oppressive systems. The demonstration of BLM as a movement with multi-pronged, but interconnecting goals illustrates how the movement is inclusive, which transcends the perception of the movement as divisive. Finally, this evidence demonstrates how fighting against oppression in all its forms, and advocating for solidarity with marginalized groups within and outside of the Black community bridged the gap between sense of community and diversity.

5. Limitations and Barriers

Although there are several strengths to the intersectional political lens of BLM, there may be limitations or barriers to scaling this approach. Community psychologists or activists increasing individual and community intersectional political consciousness requires the capacity to spread awareness. This also requires openness to receive this information and reject normative beliefs that media outlets socialize individuals to believe, such as the “American dream” and that America is in a post-racial society. Additionally, as BLM’s platforms indicate, multiple systems (schools, housing, juvenile and criminal justice systems, immigration) are intertwined and contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups. Consciousness within only one of these sectors is insufficient because these systems work together to maintain their hierarchy. Thus, individuals must be aware of all systems and understand how they are connected in order to strive for the intersectional political consciousness that is necessary to dismantle the oppressive natures of these systems. Altogether, there are several potential barriers that may arise in the attempt to use and embody an intersectional political lens to bridge and integrate both a sense of community and diversity in striving towards solving social issues. However, Community Psychology provides several solutions to help address these barriers.

6. Community Psychology-Driven Solutions to Address Barriers

There are several possible solutions for addressing barriers related to intersectional political consciousness that are grounded in Community Psychology. As previously mentioned, the utilization of an ecological and structural perspective – which is a foundation of Community Psychology – is necessary because the framing of a problem determines how it is defined, explored, and resolved (Kloos et al., 2012; Ryan, 1976). Additionally, the previously identified systems, such as schools and juvenile and criminal legal systems, exist within different levels of

a hierarchy that individually and intersectionality uphold and perpetuate oppressive systems, ideas, and policies. Examining these systems from an ecological approach would entail tasks such as civic and psychoeducation in schools, and reframing an alternative definition of the problem when communicating with community and government leaders who have the power within these systems. Education promotes awareness, and reframing and re-defining social issues helps to view problems in their social and cultural context. This view is important for identifying solutions to the issue.

Another approach congruent with Community Psychology that can be used to combat barriers to intersectional consciousness-raising is community building. This entails identifying and building relationships and alliances with different community members and organizations that are dedicated to social issues (Wolff, 2001). Strong community partnerships, relationships, and alliances allow for multiple forces with common goals to align together and generate various multifaceted approaches, each with different strengths, to resolve the issue.

7. Conclusion

The killing of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of police officers is a pervasive social problem that has multiple adverse outcomes for the Black community. The use of deadly force is a part of a long, pervasive history of dominant groups who have systematically oppressed, punished, and marginalized Black people at both individual and systemic levels. This social issue should be explored and examined through an ecological lens to optimally and efficiently ameliorate this problem.

Furthermore, it is important that organized responses to this issue, such as #BlackLivesMatter, simultaneously resist oppressive systems and advocate for equality for Blacks while staying true to the core values of Community Psychology. In the fight towards social justice, negotiating how diversity can be bridged in the context of social action, including how an intersectional political consciousness can be developed and sustained, is an important area of future research. The BLM movement provides an important opportunity for community psychologists to continue to untangle the community-diversity dialectic that suggests developing a sense of community and having respect for diversity are incompatible concepts. Rappaport's (1981) words remain true today, that "it is the paradox itself that should be of interest because that should tell us something about the fact that a variety of contradictory solutions will necessarily emerge, and that we ought not only expect [this], but welcome this" (p.9). Essentially, this means that differences of opinions on how to address and solve social issues are indeed natural and may emerge, which may lead to the creation and subsequent widening of gaps and boundaries. However, identifying the ways this dialectic may be bridged could be the key to finding commonality across real and imagined boundaries. Breaking down these boundaries to help strive for solving social issues may be possible utilizing core values of community psychology, including commitment to empirical research and action that is grounded in social justice, community, diversity, and empowerment.

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